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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: WHY THERE'S HOPE: INDPENDENT STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY: In December and January, Embassy Ashgabat's Consular Section interviewed dozens of students studying in the United States but not on U.S. government programs who had returned to Turkmenistan for the holidays but planned to return to the United States spring semester. Most of these students began their studies in the United States at the end of the Niyazov era, during the darkest days for education in Turkmenistan. They vary in background and field of study, but all share a history of resourcefulness in overcoming challenges, and all expressed optimism for Turkmenistan's future. In contrast to students interviewed at the end of the Niyazov era, these students genuinely see a place for themselves in their country, where they will be able to use their education and make a difference. We share their hopes for their success. (NOTE: We have omitted names to protect the students' privacy. END NOTE.)
END SUMMARY.

THE FIRST TURKMEN STUDENT AT MIT- "BUT NOT THE LAST"

¶3. (SBU) A junior at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is majoring in chemistry. Originally from Turkmenabat in Lebap province, his family now lives in Ashgabat. He wants to return to Turkmenistan to work in the oil and gas sector, which he believes will expand when Western energy companies come to Turkmenistan. He was not a FLEX participant. Instead, he learned English from various Peace Corps Volunteer teachers before going to the United States to study intensive English. No one in his family speaks English or has traveled to the United States. His trajectory to MIT is all the more impressive given that it was entirely self-directed. When asked about his experience in such a challenging program, he said that he studies constantly to keep up with the "curve breaking" foreign students in his classes. He noted that he was the first Turkmen student at MIT, but he hoped that one day Turkmen students would be as commonplace there as his Indian and Chinese classmates.

"NO ONE HERE IS DOING THIS KIND OF WORK"

¶4. (SBU) A student from Ashgabat is completing her PhD in geography

at the University of Arizona, having earned a master's degree in environmental studies at Ohio State University. A former exchange visitor who worked at the Ministry of Nature Protection, she has always planned to return to Turkmenistan to work in her field. She chose the University of Arizona, she said, because Arizona's ecosystem was similar to Turkmenistan's, particularly the Caspian Rim area that is the focus of her research. She is enthusiastic about her role as a cross-cultural ambassador. She proudly noted that she had returned for several summers to Turkmenistan to give recruitment talks for Ohio State. She added, "Now I will help recruit for the University of Arizona." She believes that private sector funding for environmental work in the United States could be a model for Turkmenistan - especially if foreign energy companies move in - allowing for sustainability research and programs. She is eager to bring her expertise back to Turkmenistan, because "no one in Turkmenistan is doing this kind of work."

FUTURE POWER COUPLE?

¶ 15. (SBU) A young woman originally from Turkmenabat and her husband, a native of Balkan province, met as graduate students at Eastern Illinois University, where she received a master's degree in economics and he received a master's degree in political science. While he has stayed on at Eastern Illinois to complete his PhD, she accepted an assistantship at the University of Northern Iowa, where she is pursuing a PhD in public policy. Although both completed their undergraduate degrees at the International Turkmen-Turkish University in Ashgabat, they did not become friends until they studied together in the United States. Both are enthusiastic about the possibility of returning to teach or finding a position in the government - opportunities that would be open to them now that the government of Turkmenistan has announced it will once again recognize foreign degrees.

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ALL IN THE FAMILY

¶ 16. (SBU) One family in Ashgabat is not politically well-connected or extremely wealthy. The parents are actors at the Turkmen State Theater. Despite the odds, three of the five children in the family are studying in the United States. All three have followed a pattern typical to many Turkmen students by beginning their studies at Houston Community College (HCC) before transferring into undergraduate degree programs. The twin sisters are both alumnae of the FLEX program, although in different program years. They are completing their studies at HCC and will transfer into bachelor's programs next year. Their eldest brother followed his younger sisters to the United States. He received his bachelor's degree from Northern Illinois University, where he is currently enrolled as a master's degree student.

THE LONG ROAD TO A PHD IN EDUCATION

¶ 17. (SBU) With the recent announcement that the government of Turkmenistan wants to reopen graduate study programs at state universities, one female student could be in a great position to help shape the future of education in Turkmenistan. Currently a PhD student in Education at the University of Missouri, she is focusing on curriculum development in mathematics and related subjects. Her experience highlights the improvement in prospects for ambitious young Turkmen. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in economics from Turkmen State University, the best job she could find was working in the sales department at the Grand Turkmen Hotel. After working there for nearly two years, she was accepted into a master's degree program at Central Michigan University. The prospect of returning to work in Turkmenistan was less certain when she began her studies. However, things have changed so much that she expects, by the time she finishes her program in 2009, to return home to a different Turkmenistan than the one she left.

¶ 18. (SBU) COMMENT: If these students are indicative of the Turkmen students studying abroad, especially in the West, they will be an important source of new talent to advance the changes under way in their country. They will be more qualified to compete in the global economy than their countrymen who did not study abroad and, we hope,

ambassadors for even better relations between our two countries.
END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND